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Rhetoric and Region
Local Determinants of Literary Expression

Edited by
Richard Torrance

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Japanese Earthquakes, Tsunamis, and Storms as Archetypal Symbols: an Explication of Kamo no Chōmei's *The Earthquake*, *The Tale of Heike*, Rai Sanyō's *Hearing of the Earthquake in Kyoto* and the Great East Japan Earthquake

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Abstract

Writings on natural disasters reflect tragic experiences of peoples and the nostalgic cravings after it. This study examines the portrayal of earthquakes, storms and tsunamis as a national concern in Japanese literature. The portrayal of the theme, which has remained a topical issue, is psychological, and sociological. The portrait of personal and communal loss is a reflection of the perspectives and survival strategies that emerge after such disasters occur. This study examines two narrative accounts and a poetry piece written to capture the magnitude and effect of the earthquakes at different periods in Japan. The study examines these writings vis-a-vis media accounts of the recent 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, and the Fukushima Daichi nuclear disaster.

Introduction

Documentation of histories and profiles of nations usually focus on natural features of the country, which include the topography, geological structure, and climate among other things. This study focuses on the literary and rhetorical documentation of aspects of Japanese features as a nation and as a region in the universe.

According to Aoki (1994), a major feature of the “Japanese archipelago is its geological instability, including frequent volcanic activities and many earthquakes...” (Aoki 4). Japan’s geological structure, climatic and seasonal changes bring about frequent natural disasters (Aoki 5), these include heavy rains resulting from the *baiu* front, landslides, wind damage and floods associated with the autumn typhoons, cold damage and snow damage caused by intense winter precipitation.

Large-scale earthquakes accompanied by typhoons and accelerated tidal waves known as tsunamis are the greatest bane of Japanese natural disasters. Aoki (1994) states that: “Earthquakes on the scale of the Tokyo earthquake of 1923, which was assigned a magnitude of 7.9, strike somewhere in Japan every several decades” (Aoki 5).

It is also on record that the concentrated percentage of eruptive energies released worldwide is centered around the Japanese Islands. Bressan (2011) corroborates these facts. In his words: “Tsunamis are generated by the rapid dislocation of large quantities of water by displacement of seafloor triggered by earthquakes or landslides, also by explosions caused by volcanic eruption or meteoric impacts”).

Bressan reiterates these points regarding the Japanese experience in stating that the Pacific Ocean upon which the Japanese archipelago is situated is surrounded by “[t]ectonic active borders of the lithospheric plates... (Bressan 2011). He observes that fifty-three percent of worldwide tsunamis occur in the borders and eighty-two percent of them are earthquake induced.

While Aoki (1994) takes as reference the most famous Tokyo earthquake of 1923, which resulted in more than a hundred thousand deaths, Bressan takes his bearings from recognized tsunami sediments which go back as far as 500 years. He cites the fact that the northern-eastern coast generated large scale tsunamis on 13th July 869 published in *The True History of Three Reigns of Japan* (901), the 1596 Uryu-Jima tsunami, the December 2, 1611 Honshu tsunami, 26, January 1700 tsunami, described as an orphan tsunami, the Island of Yezo (modern Hokkaido) 1737 tsunami, the 15th June 1896 Sanriku tsunami that truncated the celebration of the return of soldiers from war, the March 3rd 1933 tsunami which reoccurred on the Sanriku Coast, and the May 1960 and July 1993 Okushiri tsunamis which are amongst the deadliest tsunamis recorded by the Japanese Meteorological Agency. The following striking Japanese inscription on the 600 years old stone marker situated near Kesenuma captures the essence of living with this constant threat, and it warns:

Always be prepared for unexpected tsunamis. Choose life over your possessions and valuables. “If an earthquake comes, beware of tsunamis.” High dwellings are the peace and harmony of our descendants; remember the calamity of the great tsunamis. Do not build any homes below this point. (Bressan, March 17, 2011)

The March 11, 2011 tsunami in the Tōhoku region reinforces the topicality of this issue in contemporary times. The three literary accounts selected for analysis here, cover in a most outstanding manner the occurrence, the psychological impact and aftershocks of these natural disasters. The word ‘aftershocks’ here is employed to imply the real tremors or series of tremors occurring after the main instance of agitation of the earth crust as well as the variations of shocks: physical, emotional, psychological, sociological, economical, to mention a few, that create distress and inflict trauma upon a person, a family, a people or a nation. The archetypal nihilistic symbols in these texts are universally allusive. According to Bodkin (1968), archetypal patterns and symbols recur in the lives of peoples and places universally. These symbols transcend the surface value they may seem to hold and may be indicative of several indices. Examples of these patterns include themes, characterisation, symbols, emotions as well as principles.

In this study, the focus is on earthquakes, tsunamis, and storms as archetypes which recur in Japanese literature. I examine the nihilistic delusions or phobias that arise as a result of such occurrences and rebound as a psychological reaction to crisis, particularly of victims of disasters who suffer the adverse consequences of the circumstances

Kamo no Chōmei’s ‘The Earthquake’ is an extract from his much celebrated work *Hōjōki*. (*An Account of my Hut*). Written in 1212, this work has a deep philosophic tinge which is characteristic of the Buddhist thought and identity of the writer. This work portrays the archetypal

symbols which permeated the Japanese society at the time because of the disasters from which the Japanese society suffered during the late Heian Period.

According to Donald Keene (Kamo no Chōmei 197): “Kamo No Chōmei, describes in this work some of the calamities which he personally witnessed...and his accounts of the life he led before and after abandoning the world is still very moving.”

Kamo no Chōmei’s autobiographical accounts before narrating *The Earthquake* includes a narrative on *The Great Fire* of 1177, that led to the loss of lives of thousands of ‘men and women,’ horses and oxen, sixteen mansions as well as innumerable houses (Kamo no Chōmei 198) and *The Whirlwind* that engulfed the capital in 1180, destroying great and small houses crippling several of the people who had to admit: “we have whirlwinds all the time but never one like this ... it must be a presage of terrible things to come” (Kamo no Chōmei 199).

His account of the 1185 earthquake is perhaps the most tragic of all the experiences he shares because of the archetypal themes, setting and conflict. However, the 1185 earthquake remains of great significance because the Japanese society were ill-prepared for the devastations of the earthquake and the subsequent, tsunami.

He describes it as a great earthquake of ‘an intensity not known before,’ and writes of the crumbling of mountains, the burying of rivers, the tilting of the sea and the immersion of the land in waters. In his words: “The earth split and water gushed up; boulders were sundered and rolled into the valleys” (Kamo no Chōmei 203).

One is quick in observing the archetypal imagery and symbols which are clearly spelt out in his choice of words. The modern definition of tsunami is a Japanese word coined out of two words *Tsu* - harbour and *nami* - wave. *The Chambers Dictionary* of English describes it as ‘a very swiftly travelling sea wave that attains great height, caused by an undersea earthquake or similar disturbance (1999:1784). The term “tsunami” is first attested in the 17th century, so it could not have been used to describe the phenomena at the time *The Account of my Hut* was written, but it fits the description of the archetypal theme which Kamo no Chōmei describes as the ‘great earthquake.’ He narrates the intensity of the impact of the earthquake stating that boats rowed along the shores were swept out to sea, horses walking on the roads lost footing and the awful devastation and destruction of lives and properties.

He writes effusively of the damage that swept through the capital as not one shrine, pagoda, or mansion was left intact. The tumbling down of structures as buildings collapsed, generating ashes and dust rising high into the clouds. In addition, he describes with pathos, the combination of the rumbling of the quaking earth and the structures crashing with thunderous ominous sounds.

The victims filled with dread of collapsing buildings and being trapped, run into the streets to encounter cracks in the earth and Kamo no Chōmei aptly describes their helplessness: “They could not soar into the sky, not having wings. They could not climb into the clouds, not being dragons. Of all frightening things in the world, none is so frightful as an earthquake” (Kamo no Chōmei 204).

His description of the experience of a samurai family is equally heart rending. According to him, amongst those who perished was the only child of a fierce samurai family. Kamo no

Chōmei describes a boy, age five or six, who had built a little play house by an over hanging part of a wall and was innocently playing when the wall collapsed burying him under the rubble, in his words ‘his body was crushed flat, with only his two eyes protruding’ (Kamo no Chōmei 204). One imagines the extreme horror the family experiences while the earth continues to quake around them. The parent’s sorrow is absolute, and according to Kamo no Chōmei: “His parents took him in their arms and wailed uncontrollably, so great was the sorrow they experienced. I realized that grief of a child can make even the bravest warrior forget shame – a pitiable but understandable fact” (Kamo no Chōmei 204).

The media coverage of the March 2011 tsunami survivors showed a middle-aged mayor who wept while narrating his ordeal and that of his officers who had climbed to the roof of the Town Hall. Several of these officers lost their lives as they were swept away by the tsunami, and he breaks down at the point at which he says, despite the calamity of witnessing the death of his people, the survivors had no access to drinkable water.

Kamo no Chōmei’s narrative also captures the essence of the aftershocks—a relatively new scientific term used in describing the vibrations that take place in an aftermath of an earthquake. He describes these as ‘after tremors.’ He observes that the intense quaking subsided and ended after a while but the ‘after tremors’ continued for some while. He observes that there are daily occurrences of about twenty or thirty tremors of an ordinarily terrifying severity which later diminished in frequency to four or five daily and later one in two or three days, concluding that the after tremors continued for three months (Kamo no Chōmei 204).

Kamo no Chōmei portrays four great elements that, in his opinion, cause disasters: water, fire, wind, and the earth, the last of which he claims seldom afflicts. He concludes this narrative by comparatively examining the 1185 earthquake with the 855 earthquake. In this equally devastating earthquake the Buddha of the Tōdaiji lost its head, which was considered a ‘terrible misfortune’ but, the 855 earthquake in Kamo no Chōmei’s view is not comparable with the 1185 disaster.

He noted that at the point of calamity, people speak of the ‘vanity and meaninglessness of the world’ and somewhat appear to lessen the vanities of their hearts, but as time drifts by, the same people also drift away from the notions of the hopelessness, meaninglessness of the world, and flow back into the vanities of which they seemingly repented. His observation reinforces the archetypal theme of nothingness which is the essence of the nihilistic perspective that lends the work a greater philosophical depth and appeal which is also spiritual.

In this work, the symbols used and characterization employed gives credence to the seriousness and significance of these accounts. Archetypal themes of dispossession, despondency, dispersion of families, confusion, and death are clearly portrayed. The samurai family is also archetypal because of the psychological significance as well as the archetypal portrayal of a grieving family and parents who have lost an only child. These features, we also encounter in the other two texts employed in this study.

McCullough’s (1988) translation of *The Tale of Heike* offers, especially to foreigners, a chronology of events from 1131-1199, as well as a general history of the Genpei war and the story of the Taira family. The archetypal themes and the motifs that recur are similar to other oral

narratives in world literature which McCullough in her “Appendix” shrewdly describes as: “[C]omplcated developments and events... attributed to specifically easily understood human acts, or to the workings of super human agents, such as gods, karma and fate” (McCullough 456).

The narrative technique and plot structure of *The Tale of the Heike* is episodic and structurally more organized in detail than a casual observer may assume. The translator observes that it is a work rich in various content whose author “never loses sight of his central objective—to describe and explain how the Taira met their doom” (McCullough 457).

I, however, personally observe that the episode on ‘The Great Earthquake’ is the second to the last chapter, this chapter portrays an archetypal theme, the absolute state of defeat of the Heike, and begins with the following statement: “All the Heike had been destroyed and quiet prevailed in the west the governors, the private estates followed their proprietor’s dictates. But then, just as high and low had composed themselves, a great earthquake ... struck (McCullough 401).

The post-war defeat, quietness, readjustment to a change of government and power is sharply contrasted to the sudden catastrophic phenomena that rattled the Shirakawa area and its neighbouring communities.

The earthquake is described as being of “terrible intensity and duration.” The phenomena which now assume the status of an archetypal/national theme and imagery is described just as Kamo no Chōmei describes the earthquake that triggered the tsunami: “The earth burst open and water gushed out; huge rocks split and rolled into valleys. Crumbling mountains, buried rivers, quivering seas inundated beaches. Boats rowing along the shore tossed on the waves; horses journeying by land lost their footing” (McCullough 401).

The devastation includes the destruction of all the six *shōji* temples—Hosshōji, Sonshōji, Enshōji, Seishōji, Enshōji—in the Shirakawa area of the capital, six stories fell off from the nine-storied pagoda Hosshōji, seventeen of the thirty three sections of the Sanjūsangendō collapsed, and countless buildings collapsed into powder. Specific mention is made of aristocratic residences, imperial palaces, shrines, temples as well as commoner’s abodes.

Thunder-like sounds emanating from collapsing structures, and the darkening of the skies because of the smoke like rising dust are recorded as elements of an archetypal setting. Needless to say that the inhabitants were panic stricken, both young and old, and the entire city, we are told, ‘swooned with terror’ (McCullough 401). The imagery employed in this episode reinforces the symbols and characterization as nationally acceptable archetypal nihilistic ideas generally acknowledged by people as a means of escape—means which are evidently not available—when such a disaster strikes. Similar to Kamo no Chōmei’s narrative, *The Tale of Heike* states:

When people are endangered by flood, they can find safety on the hill, when they are menaced by fire they can escape briefly, at least by crossing the river, but a great earthquake is unspeakably dreadful. Those who are not birds cannot fly through the air; those who are not dragons cannot mount to the clouds. (McCullough 401)

In essence, the symbol of the bird and the dragon is the accepted mythical archetypal image for escape from the devastation and loss inflicted by an earthquake, because the earth, when it quakes, gives its human inhabitants no alternatives. The loss of life in Shirakawa, Rokuhara and its environs is unquantifiable. A point of convergence between McCullough's translation of the *Heike* and Kamo no Chōmei's narrative is the concept of the four archetypal elements, the earth, water, fire and wind, McCullough's translation concurs with Kamo no Chōmei's thoughts in that, with the exception of the earth, the other three are 'perennial sources of affliction' and that the earth does not ordinarily trouble people.

There, however, exists a divergence in the responses; spiritual, psychological, and emotional in the two narratives, as the people, no matter what their social status in *The Heike's* account, recited Buddhist invocations and uttered fearful shrieks expecting to die or be completely engulfed in the rumbling and motions of the earth. While the old men of ages seventy to ninety aver that they had not expected the end of the world so abruptly, prompting the children who heard them to lament and wail ceaselessly.

We are told of the Retired Emperor Shirakawa's experience. He was on a journey to Imagumano and had to turn back midway because of the disaster. We are told of the untold but imaginable distress he and his servants suffered particularly because of the numerous deaths they witness. He creates an abode of tents in a courtyard where his imperial ladies and princes move upon the ruination of his palace and his consequent displacement. Prediction according to science and scientific ideas of the day attempts to explain the phenomena and is reported in this narrative, as we are told that the Doctors of Astrology claimed that there was going to be a great "seismic convulsion ... during the hours of Boar and Rat" (McCullough 402).

The Shirakawa earthquake is compared with an earthquake of impressive magnitude witnessed during Emperor Montoku's reign and a subsequent one recorded in the second year of Tennyō. The narrator agrees that the magnitude of Shirakawa earthquake is so great it cannot be compared with the other two. Other lamented losses of lives include the drowning of the Emperor Antoku in the ocean depths at Dannoura, the hanging of the head of one of a minister of state and senior noble at the prison gate after the decisive defeat of the Taira by the Minamoto. All these are character portraiture or thematic preoccupations that are archetypal.

Men of understanding, we are told, consider the developments, grieve and lament the helplessness and hopelessness of man and a world controlled by the unseen or supernatural and in a state of despair: "From early times until the present, angry spirits have been fearsome things ... what does the future hold for us all?" (McCullough 402)

Rai Sanyō's poem *Hearing of the Earthquake in Kyoto* is a poetic account of the 1830 earthquake. Sanyō writes of a seven-day ordeal of quaking and tremors. He portrays the height of psychological distress suffered by the victims who 'beseech in tears the sky' (Rai Sanyō 438). He writes of the ninety percent of Japanese homes destroyed and portrays the archetypal dispossessed and dispersed families cowering around streets as roof tiles continue to shower down.

The poem, written in classical Chinese, is narrated from the first person point of view. So the poet persona reports his personal experience. He dumbly scratches his head in confusion, and

watches helplessly as his frail wife and children flee fearful for their abandoned abode. He observes the toppling of the stone embankments put up to prevent sea waves from penetrating the cities, and the uprooting of big trees by the awesome force of the waves. Which way escape, is his rhetorical question. His frustration and apparent helplessness is seen in the following lines:

The eldest boy wades the stream
The youngest on his nurse's back
From the nest upturned though the eggs be spared
The mother sickens with care, bearing alone a family's
burden. (Rai Sanyō 438)

The poem is a response to the post news from the capital and he states that as he sends his response, there is no guarantee that there will ever be a response. His conviction is that the status of anyone being alive or dead cannot be ascertained in the face of such devastation. "In the chaos whom shall I entreat?" he continues, when a dreadful fate crushes the multitudes. He concludes by stating that he trembles in fear as he composes the lines of his dirge. The archetypal threads in these narratives are unmistakable and are all connectives that link the themes, imagery, characterization, plot, and setting in portraying the essence of this challenge created beyond human control as portrayed in Japanese literature. These threads extend across genres and forms, which range from the autobiographical and historical accounts to the fictional autobiographical poem discussed above.

Conclusion

Japan's tumultuous experience of earthquakes, tsunamis and landslides is instructive. The topology and the landscape lend energy to the reoccurrence of these phenomena. However, several other countries experience such recurrent experiences in ancient and in contemporary times, and these have also been extensively written about. Japan's case is peculiar because of the incessant nature of the earthquakes and the magnitude of their effect on the earth and global implications and the literary interest they generate. The reports on the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami particularly those with a scientific and geological orientation, created insistent debates in earthquake prone nations situated within the ring of fire; these nations have the potential for other powerful earthquakes.

Japan has consistently responded to the major natural disasters. The nation over the years has become more prepared for these disasters, in the putting up of concrete embankments, the architectural designs of buildings and building materials that will lessen the impact of the destruction and deaths if their earth does quake. In the past, the earth has recovered, and people have returned to rebuild their dwellings, public buildings, and places of worship. Despite the fact that the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami constitute perhaps the costliest natural disaster in world history and claimed over 18,000 lives, Japanese strength and survival instincts as portrayed in

different dimensions in the writings discussed here in their thematic preoccupations with archetypal portrayals of these issues as national concerns bode well for the ultimate recovery, as painful as it may be, for the regions affected by the disaster. As we have seen in the works reviewed here, the Japanese accept their fate and, with international goodwill, will forge on.

That said, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster was not a natural disaster visited on Japan by the gods, but rather was “manmade.” Reactors 1, 2, 3, and 4 were severely damaged, which resulted in the release of large amounts of radioactive material into the air, soil, and water. The accidents at units 1-3 were rated at Level 7 (major release of radioactive material with widespread health and environmental effects), Level 7 being the same as that accorded to the disaster at Chernobyl. Unit 4 was classified as Level 3 (Serious Incident). 50,000 households were displaced in a large-scale evacuation zone and return to some areas is problematic. On August 7, 2013, more than two years after the disaster, Japanese officials of the Tokyo Electric Power Company finally admitted that highly radioactive water was leaking into the Pacific Ocean at the rate of 300 tons per day. A disaster of this nature, caught up in a maelstrom of blame-shifting, fabrications, charges, and counter-charges, is of an entirely different nature from the earthquakes and other natural disasters of the past. This unnatural, manmade disaster will most certainly find literary representations that are quite distinct from those discussed above.

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